Legends and Lore of Coles County, Illinois

Pemberton Hall

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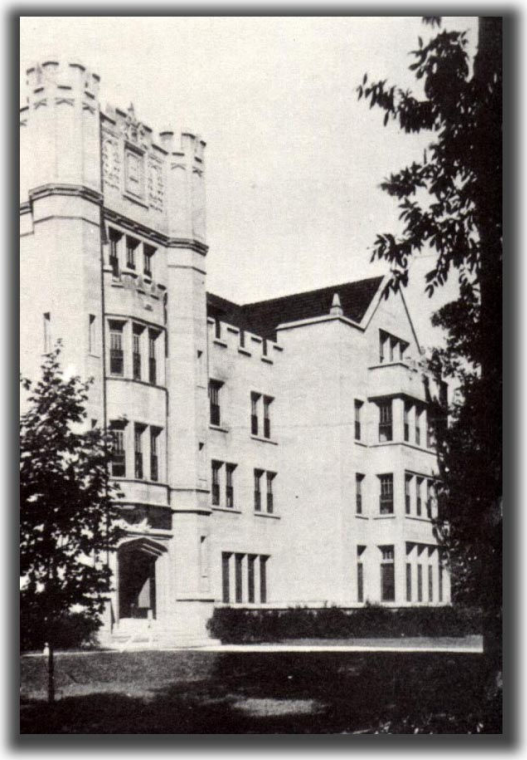


Pemberton Hall in the early half of the twentieth century, courtesy of the Warbler.

I'm glad to announce this deluxe Halloween issue of L&LCC concerns Coles County's most nationally-known legend, haunted Pemberton Hall and the ghost of Mary Hawkins.

You've heard or read the story a dozen times.

Two young co-eds stay in their dorm over break. One of them leaves for some reason, this time to play the piano on the fourth floor. Unbeknownst to her, the dorm janitor is a murderous fiend who attacks her, sometimes with a knife, sometimes with a dislodged piano wire, stopping the carnage only to perpetrate further unspeakable acts upon her body before apparently disappearing. Not quite dead, the girl crawls to her dorm room, only to discover it locked. Her roommate doesn't respond to the girl's scratches or her gargled attempts to scream. The next morning, her roommate finds the girl dead in the hallway.

Pretty scary stuff, huh? Probably not to any desensitized '90s horror movie buff, unless he or she happens to be living in the oldest girl's dormitory in the state of Illinois, a dormitory that had appropriated the preceding urban legend as part of its ninety-six year history.

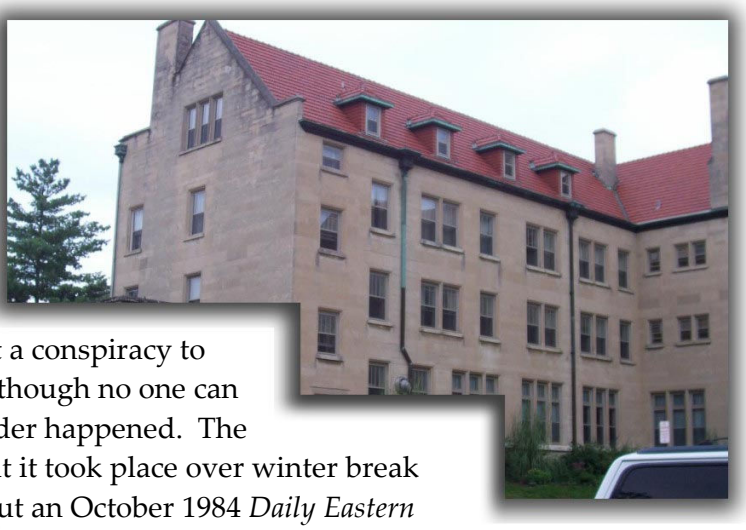
Over the years, an old plaque dedicated to Mary Hawkins (the first director of Pemberton Hall), a popular urban legend, and wishful thinking have combined to create one of the most enduring legends in Coles County. But in this case, truth is almost stranger than fiction.

In 1907 the Appropriations Committee of the State legislature passed a bill to provide $100,000 to build Pemberton Hall, which was named after state senator Stanton C. Pemberton, a strong supporter of the bill. The first dorm director for Pemberton Hall was the now infamous Mary Hawkins, who served in that position from 1910 to 1917. She was said to be very strict and wouldn't allow the girls staying there to go to social functions without being chaperoned. Perhaps ironically, Mary Hawkins died on October 29, 1918 at the Kankakee State Mental Hospital, a year after leaving her position as "Dorm Mother," from complications stemming from syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that had no cure at the time.

During the early half of the twentieth century, women attending the college and staying in Pemberton Hall would, in addition to their classes, learn basic housekeeping skills and serve dinner to the college deans on some occasions. They weren't allowed outside

after 7:30p.m. on weekdays and 10p.m. on weekends. Mary Hawkins personally dolled out punishment for any infraction until she left in 1917 and a student government took over.

The alleged murder took place during World War 1, when the college newspaper was published sporadically to conserve materials for the war effort, so there is no newspaper from the weeks in question,



A typical exposé done by the Daily Eastern News around Halloween.

leading some to suggest a conspiracy to cover up the murder, although no one can agree on when the murder happened. The current consensus is that it took place over winter break either in 1916 or 1917, but an October 1984 *Daily Eastern News* article written by Diane Schneidman suggested May as the month the murder occurred, and an article published in 1982 claimed it occurred during Spring Break. Jo-Anne Christensen, in her book *Ghosts Stories of Illinois*, has the crime committed in the midst of a furious thunderstorm, which also suggests springtime. However, the *National Directory of Haunted Places*, written by Dennis William Hauck, challenged all of those accounts by changing the year of the murder to 1920, long after Mary Hawkins was deceased.

Whatever the case, there seem to be two versions of the story. In one version, Mary is the unfortunate student. In the version told by the staff at Pemberton Hall over the years, Mary is the Dorm Mother at the time of the murder, and her ghost has come back to guard the girls at Pem Hall for all eternity. Obviously the Resident Assistants would rather tell their residents about a harmless protector spirit who keeps them safe than a wailing banshee of a girl who had been murdered in the attic and scratches at the doors. However, only a few articles written about Pemberton Hall acknowledge there may be two ghosts instead of just one.

The earliest article I could find concerning the ghosts of Pemberton Hall was written by Karen Knupp in October of 1976. She suggested that the story, having been told for "years and years," was consistently handed down from veteran Pem Hall residents to incoming freshmen. Some of the eerie encounters she chronicled was a girl who saw a light emanating from one of the

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windows on the fourth floor, a Resident Assistant who found that the lounge furniture would rearrange itself, and a strange encounter with a girl in a white gown who went around asking for safety pins before disappearing. She noted that some residents had celebrated their unique heritage by holding a "Mary Hawkins Day" the previous spring.

In November of the same year, Karen wrote a follow up story after she had been contacted by a 1921 resident of Pem Hall. The woman told the story of Uterpa Sharps, a thirty year old student who would scare the younger girls by jumping out of the janitor's closet. The woman, who if she had actually lived there in 1921 could not have known Mary Hawkins (who would have been deceased at that time), claimed that, "no one would tell Miss Hawkins… she was English and very strict." If it was true she knew Mary Hawkins, then the events featuring Uterpa Sharps must have taken place before 1917. At any rate, she suggested that Uterpa's strange behavior was the origin of the legend, not a murder.

Some writers have filled in details over the years. According to a *Daily Eastern News* article published on October 31, 1997, the murdered girl was Mary, and her room was number 308. Mary had been sleeping with a married professor at the college before she was murdered, suggesting a possible motivation for the crime. Diane Schneidman wrote that the janitor had gone crazy after his wife died, giving another potential motivation for the murder. In that account, as well as others, the crime was committed with an axe.

The exterior of the building.

In 1984, William M. Michael, a writer for the Decatur Herald, spent the night in the fourth floor piano room. Needless to say, he reported no encounters with the ghost or anything unusual at all. Never-the-less, in 1985 a resident reported that small, black footprints would continually and mysteriously appear on the floor of her room. No matter how many times she cleaned them off, they would reappear. That strange phenomenon has not been reported since.

According to interviews conducted by Margaret Allen-Kline, who wrote her Master's thesis on the legend in 1998, several students living in Pemberton Hall connected the crazed janitor in the story to a "local insane asylum," the notorious Ashmore Estates. But as Margaret points out, the building that became known as Ashmore Estates was originally an Alms House (poor farm), not an asylum. Regardless, the building

would have just been constructed during the time the murder supposedly took place, and it was doubtful there had been anyone staying there.

Margaret believed the legend of Mary had formed a "folk community" at EIU because the students always report the story as if it was true.

Kelly Bryan, a Pem Hall resident in 2002 and 2004, told me that she never experienced anything unusual while living there and didn't believe in the story, although she noted that the basement always gave her the creeps. "From what I've read, I just don't think it has much basis in reality," she said. "If you really believe in it, you're more likely to blame things on the ghost."

Over the years, Pemberton Hall has opened its doors, and the notorious fourth floor, around Halloween in an effort to take advantage of the story, or just to have some fun with it. The tradition of turning Pem Hall into a haunted house dates back to the early 1970s, according to an October 1978 article that stated the haunted house would be held "for the first time in many, many years." The event was repeated the next year for a small fifty-cent fee. Apparently the experience wasn't well received, since the Resident Housing Association haunted house was moved to an abandoned residence on Seventh Street in 1983. "The act will be more convincing than the usual RHA haunted house at Pemberton Hall," the project chairman commented in an article about the move. Pemberton Hall resumed its haunted house in 1997, complete with an actress playing the X-Files theme on the fourth floor piano.

Pemberton Hall dining area circa 1915. Photo courtesy of the Warbler.

Despite a completely unsubstantiated claim by Elizabeth Raichle in a *Daily Eastern News* article from October 1993, there is no evidence that a death ever occurred in Pemberton Hall at any time, let alone the winter or spring of 1916, or 1917. This is enough to dispel most of the story.

However, there is no evidence that any amount of facts will stop the story from continuing to be told, passed on, and adapted by hundreds of students each year, especially when it directly addresses the deepest fears of EIU's female population. From doors that lock themselves, to strange electrical behavior, to unusual sounds coming from the fourth floor, generations of Pemberton Hall residents have attributed otherwise explainable phenomenon to the ghosts of Mary Hawkins and a murdered resident. Thanks to a steady stream of attention and the thrill of the story, there is nothing to suggest the legend will ever fade from memory.